The THOREAU SOCIETY BULLETIN

BULLETIN FIFTY-SIX SUMMER, 1956

THOREAU AND THE YOUNGER GENERATION

by Herbert F. West.

[Prof. West has turned over to us the rough notes he used for his address. From these we have attempted to reconstruct his talk. Our apologies to him if we have put any words into his mouth that he didn'tsay and our apologies to our readers for the omission of the extemperaneous portions of his address.]

Since Thoreau's day there has been a considerable shift in belief in the way one seeks truth, indeed, in one's conception of truth itself. In the mid 19th century there was an entity one called the Soul, part of the great universal mind or Over-Soul. Each of us had the power to commune directly with God, to find absolute truth as revealed to us directly by the Divine. Truth came to us in flashes of light from Heaven. There was a belief in Absolutes. There was a belief in direct revelation. In fact, Thoreau was a Mystic: that is, one who communed directly with God and who knew the truth within him.

Today, since William James and John Dewey, there has come about a belief in the relativity of truth. The methods of science have been applied to philosophy with somewhat disastrous results to the traditional philosophy of Transcendentalism popular in Thoreau's and Emerson's day. The pragmatic view of truth has taken over. What works or fits in with other facts is true for so much, for the time being. Our ethics today are more pragmatic than absolute. No one today believes in absolute principles save the old, the professional philosophers and the devout Christians. These views, or changing aspects of truth, are reflected in the contemporary students' point of view on Thoreau. For thirty years now I have given a course called "Types of American Thought." Recently I polled some of my students on their reactions to some of Thoreau's ideas. The results follow:

On the question of Thoreau's remark, "Knowledge does not come to us in details but in flashes of light from Heaven," more than two to one no longer believed in intuitive knowledge as a way to truth. A few still believed that in questions of morality, truth does reveal itself intuitively, directly, to the individual. But the majority held a relative and pragmatic view of truth in morals as in everything else.

In regard to Thoreau's anarchistic attitude in his essay on "Civil Disobedience," eight out of ten felt it was a harmful attitude to take today. It might well be argued that this ratio might also have been true in Thoreau's time, but certainly not so in regard to a mystical view of knowledge. One must not, cannot, obey the "moral law within," the students feel, but must make obeisance to the laws of the land, whether it concerns conscientious objection or any other moral decision.

Very few disliked Thoreau. For every one who did, there were twelve who admired him, his independence, his integrity, his honesty. Most admired him for his example in standing out against the herd-spirit. However most of the young men agreed that individualism is on the wane and conformity is not only fashionable but almost a necessity if one is to get on. In fact, the American college of today does little to encourage individualism and does place a premium on conformity. (Indeed they did also in Thoreau's time as anybody who has read Emerson or Thoreau knows.)

There are happily, however, a small minority who do have the courage to be themselves, to think for themselves, in spite of laws, in spite of McCarthyism or mass pressures of any kind. Most, however, desire to conform, to make money, and are not willing to surrender to the idea, as expressed by Emerson, that Truth also has its bed and board. No one today is seeking truth. As the late Nicholas Berdyaev said, "No one today likes truth: utility and self-interest have long ago been substituted for it." If it is truth they are seeking, it is a relative one which would have been decidedly unsatisfactory to Thoreau. Most of my students considered Thoreau's individualism and way of thinking antiquated in the atomic age.

ALCOTT ON THOREAU'S ATLAS OF CONCORD

by Anton Huffert. . . .

When Bronson Alcott was Superintendent of Schools in Concord, Massachusetts, from 1859 to 1865, he wanted to make his friend Thoreau the central figure for introducing life into the classroom. In the Concord school reports, Alcott gave practical recognition to Thoreau as a great teacher of the out-of-doors and of local lore.

In the Superintendent's report of 1860, Alcott mentioned that the School Committee had suggested "to the citizen of our town best able to perform the work, the preparation of a small textbook for the schools, comprising the geography, history and antiquities of Concord." In the report of the following year, Alcott revealed that the proposed "Concord Book" or "Atlas of Concord" was to be a compilation from the writings of Concord townsmen and women, including Buckley, Wood, Ripley, Hoar, Shattuck, Frost, Jarvis, Horace Mann, Elizabeth Peabody, Bradford, Hawthorne, Channing, Emerson, and Thoreau. The book was to be illustrated with cuts and a good map of the Concord districts, and was to show the location of the families and to contain the "antiquities of education from the first

settlement." (Concord (Mass.) School Committee, Reports of the School Committee and Superintendent of Schools of the Town of Concord, 1862, p. 32). The "Atlas" was intended for the use of reading classes and also for home use. A reference copy was to be placed in every school.

Alcott noted that geography was being studied in all the schools of Concord. The children recited from their textbooks and answered questions based on maps, but did not actually observe their local natural environment. It did not, therefore, seem quite appropriate to ask them questions "about things outside, or to expect them to find the places in the town named and delineated in the little map of Concord hanging on the wall." The pupils could find their homes and their playground but knew little of remote districts and far less of the world they lived in. The natural method of studying geography begins at home, Alcott believed.

> Fortunately, the town had in Thoreau a sort of resident Surveyor-General of the town's farms, farmers, animals, and everything else it contains, -- who makes more of it than most persons with a continent at their call. Will he just set his ten senses at work upon an illustrated Atlas for the citizens, giving each such account of the world they inhabit, with such hints concerning the one he lives in, as he pleases? Such a book would suit us all, and become a model textbook for studies out of doors, and a gift to our children for which they could not be too grateful. (Concord (Mass.) School Committee, Reports of the School Committee and the Superintendent of Schools, 1861, p. 26.)

Life would then be brought into the classroom.

Concord should find ways of employing the abilities of its best men, Alcott argued in behalf of Thoreau. Every town owes this service to itself and to its children, but especially if "it be enriched with any gifted with more senses and stronger wit, with genius and adaptabilities surpassing most men; any who might educate them in ways so agreeable in its geography, its natural history, its antiquities, or the poetry of literature, the history of their minds, their natures and calling." If from the "Atlas" the pupils studied the fields, woods, rivers, and landscape through Thoreau's eyes, they would be helped immediately and at first hand to comprehend their mysteries and uses.

But a still better way of studying geography was to go walking with Thoreau. Alcott knew from experience the value of this. He had also helped survey Marston Watson's estate, the "Hillside" at Plymouth. Now he proposed that the pupils should accompany Thoreau to the fields: "I can conceive of the surveyor employing some of the understrappers for studying under his eye by carrying his chain for him, each young Agassiz and Kane taking his turn as it came." The pupils could bring along their maps if they wished, but, more important, they were now to observe the natural objects on which these were based.

Plane maps used merely for themselves, Alcott held, are not adequate for instructional purposes, for they afford the child little knowledge besides names and signs. "This dot is all" the pupils "see of the city named London or Constantinople; that line is all they take in of the Missouri or Amazon; that hum is veritable Appenine or Andes." Names, lines, and dots have nothing in common with the objects which children can observe and get to know from their school windows.

Names are not solid ground on which one can climb or play ball; nor are they rivers for boating or for skating in winter. To the children, plane maps are "all dreamland, dreary soil, as barren of interest as of whortleberries or pickerel, an impertinent paper hanging on the wall, a roll call of hard names, not the reveille for play they are waiting for."

But if map study were accompanied by illustrations from the Concord Book, from Thoreau's works and from walks with him and, once a month, with the classroom teacher, then something of life might be introduced into the study of geography, history, biography, the elements of the natural sciences, geology and botany.

Alcott approached Thoreau personally on the subject of the "Atlas." In February, 1861, he recorded in his Journal: "I wish him to compile his Atlas of Concord, for which he has rich material, and the genius; but he must work in his own way and times, sure to give us something worth waiting for, and surprising, when he shall print a book." (Amos B. Alcott, Journal of February 4, 1861, The Journals of Bronson Alcott, p. 334). In the following year, Alcott reported a delay in the Concord Book for the time being, even though some progress had been made in the compilation. Thoreau's death, the Civil War, and the termination of Alcott's superintendency put an end to the plans for the Atlas.

CHARLOTTE THATCHER, 1870-1956

It is our sad duty to record the death of Miss Charlotte Thatcher of Bangor, Me. Miss Thatcher was, to the time of her death, Thoreau's closest living relative. Her great grandmother was Nancy Thoreau Billings, a sister of Thoreau's father. Thoreau visited frequently the homes of the Billings and the Thatchers in Bangor. And his sister Sophia spent the last years of her life with them, as did his Aunt Maria Thoreau, the last of that branch of the family to carry the Thoreau name.

Miss Thatcher, who spent all of her life in Bangor, was a quiet, unassuming person. Up to twenty years ago, she spent several months every few years traveling abroad. She inherited many of the Thoreau family possessions, which she treasured greatly. And she was most generous in permitting Thoreau scholars to examine them. Some years ago she had photostats made of Thoreau's Harvard diploma, which was in her possession, so that it might be reproduced in facsimile in Thoreau Society Booklet 5, thus putting an end (we hope) to the legend that he received no diploma. That is only one minor example of her generosity. As secretary of the society I can vouch for a large sheaf of letters from her in my files filled with careful and thoughtful answers to my many and frequent questions as to her Thoreau possessions. I, with all who knew her, feel greatly her loss.

NOTES AND QUERIES . . .

All Thoreau students know the love story of Thoreau and Ellen Sewall. It is interesting to note that the great grand nephew of Miss Charlotte Thatcher is named David Thoreau Sewall! Thus, at long last, a Thoreau and a Sewall are joined. Master Sewall is now one year old.

A member has asked us if "Simplicity is the keynote of gentility" is a quotation from Thoreau. Can anyone help us locate it?

Charles F. Hockett has recently composed "Three Songs on Poems of Henry David Thoreau," setting "Smoke," "Mist," and "Haze" to music for a bass voice. They are as yet unpublished.

The "Newsletter" of the Unitarian Church in Charlottes, N.C., for June 10, 1956, contains a long quotation from WALDEN.

The cost of printing this bulletin has been covered by the life membership of Mr. Philip English of New Haven, Conn. Life membership is $25.00.

Mrs. Helen B. Morrison of Oberlin, O., is working on a "Day-Book or Index Rerum" of excerpts from Thoreau's JOURNAL.

When Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, Minister of Health for India, visited Boston in early June under State Department and Ford Foundation auspices, she asked to make a special Thoreau pilgrimage to Concord and did so on June 2.

A bill to establish a National Wilderness Preservation System has been introduced into Congress. The Wilderness Society (2144 P St., N.W., Wash., D.C.) has issued a special pamphlet defending the bill. Copies may be obtained free of charge from the Wilderness Society.

New York University Press has recently signed a contract with Prof. Carl Bode of the Univ. of Md. and your secretary to publish the complete correspondence of Thoreau. Date of publication has not yet been announced.

Mrs. Henry Chamberlain of Wayland, Mass., writes us that her grandmother, Harriet Minot was the director of the Underground Railroad, guiding escaped slaves to Canada in pre-Civil War days and that Thoreau's Walden cabin, despite frequent statements to the contrary, was not a station on the railroad.

OUR NEW PRESIDENT . . .

Howard Zahniser of Hyattsville, Md., has been executive secretary of the Wilderness Society and editor of LIVING WILDERNESS since 1945. He has been book editor of NATURE MAGAZINE since 1935 and conducts therein a monthly column on "Nature Books in Print." He is a graduate of Greenville College and has done graduate work at American University and George Washington University. He has been a consultant on conservation problems for many government bureaus. LIFE MAGAZINE for May 28, 1956, features a picture of him on page 184.

We are particularly happy to have as our president for the forthcoming year one of our country's leading authorities on nature and conservation, subjects dear to the heart of Thoreau.

THE ANNUAL MEETING . . .

The 1956 annual meeting of the Thoreau Society was held in the vestry of the First Parish Church of Concord, Mass., on Saturday, July 14, at 10:30 a.m., with Herbert West presiding. The secretary's report (See Bulletin 52) and the treasurer's report (See below) were read and accepted. Mr. Ralph Chapman of Brattleboro, Vt., read the report of the nominating committee: President, Howard Zahniser, Hyattsville, Md.; Vice-president, Mrs. Herbert B. Hosmer, Concord, Mass.; Secretary-treasurer, Walter Harding, Charlottesville, Va.; director for two years (to complete the unexpired term of the late Wallace B. Conant), Raymond Adams, Chapel Hill, N.C.; director for three years, Mrs. Charles S. Edwards, Mt. Clemons, Mich., and Mrs. Caleb Wheeler, Concord, Mass. These officers were unanimously elected to office. Upon the motion of Mrs. Herbert Hosmer, the position of curator of the Thoreau Society Archives (in the Concord Free Public Library) was created and Mrs. Caleb Wheeler (a member of the library board) was elected to that office.

Professor Herbert West delivered the presidential address on "Thoreau and the Younger Generation," a condensation of which appears in this issue. Professor Kenneth Robinson read a paper on "Thoreau and the Wild Appetite," which will be printed in the next bulletin. Luncheon was served in Monument Hall, through the kindness of St. Bernard's Church. In the afternoon a tour of Ralph Waldo Emerson's home was provided, through the kindness of the

Ralph Waldo Emerson Memorial Association. The Concord Free Public Library arranged a special exhibition of its Thoreau holdings for the annual meeting.

TREASURER'S REPORT

On hand, July 5, 1955		$515.91
Income from dues, back copies		640.03
Expenses:		
Mailing	$147.85	
Rent for meeting	25.00	
Travel "	85.00	
Gift to officers	44.57	
Bank charges	5.44	
Printing bulletins	105.03	
Printing booklet	58.80	
Misc. printing	6.25	
Incorp. fee	2.00	
Total expenses		479.94
Cash on hand, July 10, 1956		676.00

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I am grateful to the following for information used in this bulletin: R.Adams, H.Adel,E.Allison,T.Bailey,J.Broderick,K. Cameron,L.Chirin,H.Deal,J.Dennerlein,B. Gurler,G.Hendrick,C.Hoagland,R.Hockett,G. Hosmer,J.Kennedy,A.Lownes,C.Morris,R.Cherry,R.Sawyer,R.Schaedle,M.Swaller,J.Tobin, H.Warfel,H.Wheelwright,E.Wilson,G.Wright. Please notify the secretary of new Thoreau items or ones he has missed.

The Thoreau Society Inc., is an informal organization of students and followers of Henry David Thoreau. Its bulletins are issued quarterly; its booklets, occasionally. Annual meetings are held in Concord each July. Officers of the society are Howard Zahniser, Hyattsville, Md., president; Mrs. Herbert Hosmer, Concord, Mass., vice-president; and Walter Harding, secretary-treasurer. Annual membership in the society is one dollar; life membership, $25. Communications concerning membership or publications should be addressed to WALTER HARDING, 505 CABELL HALL, CHARLOTTESVILLE, VA.